Society and the Language Classroom

edited by

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Autonomy and ideology

For the purposes of this book, *society* is interpreted as all of those wider (and overlapping) contexts in which are situated the institutions in which language teaching takes place. These include – but are not limited to – the international, national, community, ethnic, bureaucratic, professional, political, religious, linguistic, economic and family contexts in which schools and other educational institutions are located and with which they interact.

Brian Street (1984) identifies 'autonomous' and 'ideological' attitudes to the role of literacy in society. An autonomous approach assumes that literacy has an identical function in every society; in other words, all literate cultures ought to employ literacy for the same purposes. However, if in a particular situation this is patently not the case, then – from an autonomous perspective – literacy in that context is seen to be 'deviant' or 'inadequate'. An ideological approach, on the other hand, is culturally embedded and recognises the significance of the socialisation process in the construction of the meaning of literacy for members of society. Literacy is allowed to mean whatever the culture in which it is found wants it to mean. Adopting an ideological approach does not permit evaluative judgements to be made about the role of literacy in any particular society.[2]

What happens if we borrow Street's distinction and apply it to education? In order to explore this, let us take higher education as a case study.

Autonomy and ideology in higher education: a case study

An autonomous approach would presumably insist that higher education can have only one function (or one set of functions), that there is only one possible set of behaviours which is appropriate in a higher

education system, and that the same criteria can legitimately be employed for judging success and failure in all higher education systems. Any evidence that a particular system or an individual institution or even an individual academic is deviating from the norms would, we must assume, indicate that the system or the institution or the individual is in some sense inadequate.

Alternatively, an ideological approach allows us to consider the possibility that every society creates its own meaning for higher education. In turn, this requires us – particularly if we are outside observers – to exercise great care in examining and commenting on systems and on the institutions and individuals within those systems. We must be prepared to find that each society has its own requirements of higher education, and the possibility of universities having universally relevant roles therefore becomes remote.

Let us examine this issue in more detail by looking at a number of opinions about higher education in two different parts of the world – Indonesia and Great Britain – as expressed by members of those two societies. These opinions were all published at one point in historical time (the mid 1980s), and most of them were found in well-regarded and influential newspapers.

> PASSAGE A
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> In 1975, the Department of Education introduced a policy for the development of higher education. The thinking underlying this policy was that the development of higher education should be aimed at the creation of a 'national higher education system'. Higher education must be able to play a dynamic role as a prime mover in the process of modernising the population.

This passage is taken from Nurjamal (1984, my translation). The point of view which is put forward in this description of the role of higher education is clearly that of a national government (in this case, that of Indonesia), as mediated by a journalist. Higher education is seen as having a very clear function in the development process: that is, to 'modernise the population.'

> PASSAGE B
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> The culture and prosperity of a country depend on its knowledge base, comprising both education and research. Universities are the keystone without which the whole structure collapses. Each level of education takes the knowledge it receives from the one above, but this chain has to end somewhere. This is with the universities, which fulfil their true and peculiar service to the community by their duty to preserve knowledge by scholarship

> and learning, to add to knowledge by original research, and to disseminate knowledge by teaching. This inseparable triad is the proper business of a university, and all that is not conducive or incidental to these ends is a squandering of a precious resource.

This passage represents the attitude of a senior university administrator in Britain expressing himself at some length in *The Times Higher Education Supplement* (Fellgett 1986). For the author, higher education has three functions: to preserve knowledge, to add to knowledge, and to disseminate knowledge. These functions in turn give the university a unique and indeed crucial role in society. Without universities, according to Fellgett, the whole fabric of society disintegrates.

> PASSAGE C
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> One of the factors which motivates someone to become a university lecturer is that by doing so one expects that one's children will be accepted as students in the institution where one is working. This acts as a powerful moral force which makes people continue to work as university lecturers, even though they are aware that if they worked outside the field of higher education they would be able to obtain greater material rewards than they receive from state universities. However, at the present time there are indications that this motivation is no longer binding people to their institutions in the way that it used to. Several changes have taken place in our higher education system. One of these is that there is no longer a guarantee that lecturers will be able to get their children places in the university where they are working. In reaction, one is beginning to hear complaints from lecturers to the effect that they see little point in working hard in order to educate other people's children when their own children cannot be found places in the institution to which they have devoted the whole of their working lives. This is an understandable reaction from people who are experiencing disappointment.... We cannot now avoid being concerned about what will happen when the 'desire to serve' of the lecturers and administrators whose children have not been accepted evaporates completely.

Passage C (Soetrisno 1986, my translation) claims to represent the perceptions of lecturers in the Indonesian higher education system, although of course this may be a purely idiosyncratic viewpoint. Nevertheless, the passage is taken from a lengthy article which was originally published in *Kompas*, one of the most respected Indonesian daily newspapers, and we can therefore assume that, in its context and at

that particular point in history, it does not express a particularly extreme point of view. The author argues that the motivation of university lecturers for their work may be threatened by recent changes which make it increasingly difficult for them to ensure that their own children are able to be educated in the institutions where they themselves teach.

Behind this statement lie several assumptions. First of all, it must be the case that the author considers that it will be useful for the children of these lecturers to study at university. If this were not true, then being denied the opportunity to do so would not provide a cause for complaint. At the same time, there would seem to be an implication that personal relationships have played a role in determining whether or not applicants are selected for study. If this is true, then of course the function of the university becomes extremely complicated, and the criteria for judging the success of students may also be rather difficult to unravel.

It may be that I am making too much of this passage. However, its very peculiarity (from my own point of view, that is), combined with its appearance in a respectable publication, serve to indicate that higher education systems in different cultures may have roles which are quite different from those with which outside observers are familiar.

> PASSAGE D
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> A study at Lancaster University sought to examine educational objectives in higher education by interviewing lecturers. ... Most lecturers saw university education as having general effects on the quality of students' learning and thinking, and their own specialism as making a distinctive contribution to this educational process. ... The unifying theme of lecturers' views about the main purpose of university education can be summarised by the term *critical thinking*. ... In the interviews with lecturers there was substantial consensus about the importance of critical thinking.

The passage is taken from Entwistle (1984: 2–4), who looked at the assumptions which British university lecturers *claimed* were underlying their work. It appears that the development of critical thinking in students is perceived as being of supreme importance. It is interesting to note that this differs from the viewpoint put forward in Passage B. In the earlier extract, it appeared that the senior administrator in a British university saw the function of the university in terms of its contribution to the creation, preservation and dissemination of knowledge, and the role which this process has in the maintenance of society. For university lecturers, however, the role of the university is to encourage students to

develop as individuals. One wonders whether these two points of view are easily compatible. Incidentally, Entwistle observes that there was little evidence that what the interviewed lecturers did in their teaching actually contributed to the development of critical thinking in their students.

> PASSAGE E
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> The implementation of the credit semester system in private universities requires greater attention. ... In an interview with *Kompas* earlier this month, [Michael Utama] mentioned several negative side effects of the credit semester system. One of these is that students are encouraged to become extremely individualistic. ... According to Michael Utama, the system still has weaknesses which demand attention. These include the problem that the credit semester system creates a competitive spirit which in turn leads to students developing an individualistic character. ... If this system is to be introduced throughout the country, then the government will have to stipulate how many credits a student can take each semester. At the moment the number of credits which a student can take is constrained only by the student's academic record in the preceding semester. By restricting the number of credits which students can take, it will be possible to maintain their spirit of co-operation.

This passage is taken from an article in the same respected Indonesian newspaper (Anonymous 1984, my translation). The interesting argument put forward by Michael Utama, who is an academic at Satya Wacana Christian University, one of Indonesia's most prestigious private institutes of higher education, is that the credit semester system allows students the freedom to work hard and accumulate any number of credits within their capability. He believes that this is counterproductive, as it breeds individualism. For the interviewee, it is clearly important that universities should encourage the development of a co-operative spirit among their students. Academic achievement alone is insufficient.

> PASSAGE F
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> If a decision taken recently at Exeter University were reflected in the world of sport, the World Cup might have concluded with all participating teams, in order of size of the countries represented, receiving a small trophy. ... The outcome of matches need not have been reported, although interested parties might have been free to make discreet inquiries. That way, invidious comparisons between winners and losers could be avoided. Next week, Exeter University will, within departments, graduate its

> students in alphabetical order, and at the graduation ceremony their class of degree will not be indicated. ... Individual results will be known within departments or among friends. But from the point of view of parents, and the wider community represented at the ceremony, such distinctions are apparently to be deliberately obscured. ... Who will value academic excellence if the universities do not?

The final passage is by Penney (1986), and probably represents the viewpoint of a taxpaying member of the British public. From this point of view, university education is equivalent to a massive competitive sports event. The purpose of the process is to determine winners and losers, and to certify the winners in a public manner. The contrast with the attitude expressed in Passage E above is striking.

These six extracts – five of which are taken from newspaper articles – provide differing perspectives on higher education in two societies, Britain and Indonesia. Three important points emerge from this comparison of expectations.

- First, it is clear that there may be several different parties who have an interest in what a higher education system is doing. These parties include the national government, senior academic administrators, university lecturers, students, parents, taxpayers, and prospective employers. (Not all of these parties are represented in my survey above.)
- Second, the different parties concerned may have very different expectations of the same higher education system. In Indonesia, for example, the government apparently sees the universities as instruments for modernisation and social change, whilst some lecturers consider that universities provide a mechanism for the advancement of their own families. Yet others see universities as places to foster co-operation among members of society.
- Third, very different patterns or constellations of expectations may emerge in different cultures. These expectations which different parties have of one particular system may or may not coincide or overlap with each other. The expectations may or may not be realised. And realisation of expectations may be partial or complete. In other words, every system of higher education is likely to be under pressure from several different sources. The way in which those influences interact with each other will differ from one society to another, possibly even from one institution to another.

What are the consequences of the interplay of these various influences? One conclusion to be drawn is that, if the principles on which academic

systems function differ from each other, then there is a strong possibility that the criteria which need to be satisfied in order to be certified as 'successful' also differ from one system to another. This is not to suggest that the criteria of success which apply in some systems are necessarily more 'lax' than those in others, but, rather, that the criteria are simply different.

Moreover, it seems reasonable to conclude that what actually happens within universities will differ just as the particular constellation of influences, pressures and expectations differs. In other words, what universities actually do, and the behaviour which is appropriate in universities, may differ from one institution to another, and is even more likely to differ from one society to another. In every case, the functions which a university actually performs will be the result of compromise between the various influences which bear upon it. And in every case, the behaviour which may be observed within any particular university will, in sociological terms, be functional. In other words, that behaviour will be appropriate to and interpretable in terms of what it is that the institution is doing.

Taking the argument one step further, we can see that the concept of the universality of the academic enterprise must be a myth. The strength of the myth of academic universality can be illustrated by the following anecdote.

For the most part, as educated and mature members of society, we are prepared to be tolerant if individuals who are clearly alien to our own culture exhibit exotic behaviour. We are willing to interpret their eating habits, their way of dressing, their interactional style and so on as being consistent with the mores, principles and customs which are current in the culture from which these individuals originate, even if these features of behaviour are not consistent with the mores, principles and customs valid in our own society. Quite rightly, we do not assume that human behaviour should be universally uniform. Consequently, we are generally able to avoid the danger of judging the behaviour of others in terms of the principles which happen to be current in our own society. We may even pride ourselves on our cross-cultural awareness and toleration.

However, when it comes to behaviour in the academic context, we are often much less tolerant. Indeed, there is a very strong tendency for us to interpret exotic behaviour in the academic context as being not merely peculiar but actually inadequate. An example, from an Australian university, is provided by Ballard and Clanchy (1984: 14)

> ... an Indonesian postgraduate student ... was writing her thesis on Indonesian literature. ... Her supervisor complained: 'This work is not up to the level of senior high school students. It is

> disastrous for a student at postgraduate level.' Yet, as the student explained, her approach to literary criticism was exactly the style used in her own country and the tradition in which she had been trained. Apparently, academics tend to assume that there are universals of academic behaviour. Behaviour which deviates from these norms must necessarily be inferior.

A universalist assumption underlay some early thinking regarding the teaching of study skills or English for Academic Purposes. The assumption was made explicit by Candlin, Kirkwood and Moore (1975: 2-3, 8–9)

> ... reasoning processes are common to the scientific and technical stock-in-trade of speakers of a variety of languages [and therefore] it may be the case in teaching EST that one is indeed involving specialist learners in performing in the target language those mental processes and intellectual operations already familiar to them from their 'doing science' in their mother tongue. ... here we lay claim on the student's professional competence and in language teaching involve him [*sic*] in procedures with which he may be already familiar. Once again it is clear that the task is ... designing a course to develop recognition and production abilities in verbal and non-verbal modes for well-known techniques.

But Candlin and his colleagues found that the participants in their study skills course which was based on this 'universalist' principle then failed to behave in a predictable way (1975: 25):

> ... often students produce 'stylistic infelicities' which reflect a lack of precision in their modes of thought – i.e. they produce written and/or spoken utterances which are either illogical or else vague and unclear.

This frustration is an excellent example of an 'autonomous' approach and of the dangers which the adoption of such an approach may lead to. From the point of view of Candlin *et al.*, the study skills course was adequate because it was based on an assumption about the ubiquity of certain 'procedures' and 'techniques'. When course participants – academics from other parts of the world – were found not to share these procedures and techniques then the fault lay not in the course needs analysis and design but in the tendency of the foreign academics to think in 'illogical', 'vague' and 'unclear' ways.

Much progress in EAP needs analysis and course design has been made in the last twenty years, of course, but I suspect that autonomous views still lurk not very far below the surface (see 'The persistence of the

autonomous approach' later in this chapter). And indeed, as Ballard in Chapter 8 shows, autonomous attitudes are not difficult to find in Australian academia even now. (Phillipson argues that much ELT activity emanating from Britain has been 'politically disconnected' (1992: 250) from the educational contexts in which it takes place. Whilst we may not necessarily share his belief that this constitutes evidence of 'linguistic imperialism' (1992: 15), it is clear, nevertheless, that such 'disconnection' inevitably gives rise to an autonomous view of the sort of behaviour which is appropriate for the language classroom.)

An ideological approach

The preceding section has argued that there is little justification for adopting an autonomous approach when we look at behaviour in higher education – and particularly when we consider English language teaching in universities. But this focus on higher education has been meant simply as a case study. In fact the central argument of this book is that an alternative – ideological – approach is required when we look at what is going on in language classrooms at *any* level, in any type of educational institution. The purpose of this book, then, is to explore the proposition that behaviour in the classroom can be explained or interpreted with reference to the society outside the classroom. Ballard, in Chapter 8, illustrates this proposition in the following way:

> In a society that emphasises respect for the past and for the authority of the teacher, the behaviour of both teachers and students will mirror these values. A society that rewards independence and individuality will produce a very different classroom etiquette.

The contributions to this argument are organised in four parts. Part 1, *Society and the school classroom*, examines social explanations for the behaviour of learners and teachers in school classrooms. It does this through two contrasting studies: firstly through Keith Chick's detailed investigation of one episode from a mathematics lesson in a senior primary class in a South African school, and then through Virginia LoCastro's wide-ranging critique of English language syllabus reform in Japan.

Part 2, *Society and the university classroom*, consists of four chapters, by Coleman, Holliday, Shamim and Muchiri. Their discussions look at universities in Indonesia, Egypt, Pakistan and Kenya, respectively. Coleman is concerned to find parallels between 'performances' in university classrooms and those observed in other cultural contexts, whilst Holliday focuses on the contrast between expatriate and Egyptian lecturers' teaching styles. Shamim describes and explains student resist-

ance to innovation in one postgraduate class at the University of Karachi. Muchiri, meanwhile, looks in detail at the examination behaviours of undergraduate students in Kenya.

In Part 3, *Changing places and the language classroom*, our attention is directed not so much on the internal workings of universities but, rather, at the difficulties which arise when individuals move between academic cultures. Thus Ballard presents us with a study of what happens when Asian academics become students in an Australian institution, and Cortazzi and Jin examine the clash of 'learning cultures' which occurs when students in universities in China are taught by Western teachers.

The final part of this book, *Socialisation and the language classroom*, consists of just one chapter. This is Dick Allwright's argument that we do not always need to look outside the classroom for explanations of 'non-pedagogical' behaviour found inside the classroom. Allwright's contribution acts as a counterbalance to the approach which is adopted by the other investigations in the collection.

Among the issues which emerge from the various contributions, the following are particularly significant.

The effort to understand In a very honest account, Chick reports the 'often tortuous paths' which he pursued in his attempt to interpret classroom behaviour and teacher resistance to change. This *effort to interpret* is a feature of several contributions to this volume: Coleman records his own 'astonishment' at an early stage in his discussion of university classrooms in Indonesia, for example, whilst Shamim reports her 'frustration and anger' at her initial inability to understand student behaviour in her classroom in Pakistan. Holliday at first found the parameters of his curriculum development task in an Egyptian university to be problematic, although an ethnographic approach eventually helped him to understand this problem. In each case, the observer describes a process in which an autonomous perspective is abandoned – sometimes with difficulty – for a more ideological interpretation of the observed phenomena.

The learning of 'other things' In some situations, the language classroom may be the context for the learning of other things in addition to – or even in place of – language. The contributions of Chick, LoCastro, Muchiri, Coleman, and Cortazzi and Jin argue particularly strongly in this way. These 'other things' may include an understanding of the respective roles and responsibilities of teachers and students, the maintenance of face, and the development of student solidarity. If this hypothesis is confirmed, then, of course, innovation in classroom methodology may have unexpected repercussions for the teaching/learning of these 'other things'.

Alternatively, if these issues are not taken into consideration, then innovations in classroom practice may be taking on some unexpected functions even when they do apparently take root.

The student socialisation of teachers Allwright suggests that learners 'could sometimes perhaps be said to socialise their teachers into being the sorts of teachers they themselves want.' Shamim illustrates this in her description of the way in which her attempts to introduce methodologically inappropriate innovations failed in the face of student hostility. Eventually, and reluctantly, she found herself adapting to the students' expectations. Cortazzi and Jin argue that Western teachers teaching in Chinese institutions *ought* to 'move towards the Chinese culture of learning', although as yet there is little evidence that this is taking place.

The counterproductiveness of pedagogical effort The contributions of Allwright, Ballard, Chick, Holliday and Shamim all recognise – and in many cases illustrate – the fact that so much of the pedagogical effort which we find in classrooms is actually counterproductive. There are two aspects to this issue. In some cases, innovations which are intended to facilitate learning may be so disturbing for those affected by them – so threatening to their belief systems – that hostility is aroused and learning becomes impossible. In other cases, teaching which is aimed at enabling the transition to other academic contexts may simply confirm the participants' indigenous behaviour.

The persistence of the autonomous approach

In the late 1980s, three major international conferences were organised to explore the issue of the relationship between culture and language learning. These were the 1986 RELC Conference in Singapore on 'Patterns of Classroom Interaction in Southeast Asia', the 1988 Hong Kong Institute of Education conference on 'Teaching and Learning Styles Within and Across Cultures: Implications for Language Pedagogy', and the 1989 SELMOUS/BALEAP Conference in Leeds on 'Socio-Cultural Issues in English for Academic Purposes'. Publications emerged from each of these events (Das 1987, Bickley 1989 and Adams, Heaton and Howarth 1991 respectively).

What is striking about these studies of the influence of culture on the language classroom is how reluctant many researchers have been to concede that there is in fact any such influence. The collection edited by Das, for example, carries the title *Patterns of Classroom Interaction in Southeast Asia*. Even where contributors to this volume make use of classroom data (e.g. Coulthard 1987) they frequently forget to tell us anything about the context in which the data was found. Indeed seven of

the ten contributors to the Das volume say nothing at all about classroom interaction in Southeast Asia.

Bickley (1989) appears to adopt an ideological standpoint himself, and yet many of the contributors to his collection argue against it. Maley (1989: 20), for example, takes up what he terms – somewhat oddly – a 'relativist' position and argues that 'we are in danger of exaggerating the significance of cross-cultural factors.' And Gilbert's contribution to the same volume takes a briskly dismissive line (1989: 230):

> ... learning styles are often culture and language specific. ... [Nevertheless] the lessons for the second language teacher are obvious. ... Students going abroad to study will do what they have always done to adapt to the style of the classroom and get on with the learning. Teachers in the United States where students in one class may represent all the varieties of learning style preferences that are possible are wasting their time if they try to write lesson plans for their learners' preferred cognitive style.

Adams *et al.* (1991) seem to hold an 'ideological' perspective and they are supported in this by some of their contributors (e.g. Bloor and Bloor 1991; Coleman 1991). But even here some researchers take a broadly autonomous line. Furneaux *et al.* (1991: 79), for example, group all overseas students in their study into one 'non-native speaker' category, and then conclude that '[British] lecturers and NNS students at the beginning of their studies at Reading ... have similar views on seminars. ... Thus lecturers and NNS students seem to be thinking broadly along the same lines.'

What the Singapore, Hong Kong and Leeds conferences reveal, then, is the continuing strength of the autonomous approach to the study of classroom behaviour. Even when researchers are willing to explore the significance of culture in the English language classroom, this interest is often restricted either to discussion of the cultural inappropriacy of textbooks and the content of lessons (see, for example, many of the contributions in the volumes edited by Harrison 1990 and by Brock and Walters 1993) or to the 'teaching' of culture (e.g. Valdes 1986, Barro *et al.* 1993 and Kramsch 1993).

The essentially autonomous interpretation of classroom behaviour, as we have seen, is still extremely powerful. Pennycook makes the observation that teacher education for TESOL has been curiously reluctant to ask questions 'about the social, cultural and political contexts of education in any critical fashion' (1994: 142). Nevertheless, there are signs of a gradual questioning of the autonomous hegemony: Bailey and Nunan, for example, acknowledge the importance of the 'sociocultural context in which language learning and teaching take place' (1996: 359).

The implications of an ideological view

It is important to emphasise that a non-universalist – an ideological – approach to the study of behaviour in the English language classroom does *not* imply cultural stereotyping or simplistic labelling. On the contrary, it recognises the extraordinary diversity of human behaviour and human achievement. It argues that we are all, as unique individuals, nevertheless at the same time members of interlocking and overlapping communities and social systems, from the family to the nation state and beyond. In our different ways and to different degrees we influence the other members of each of those communities, just as we in turn are influenced by them. What we *do* is the product of the interaction between ourselves and this cobweb of influences. Returning to the definition provided by Street (1984), we can see that the construction of the *meaning* of the English language classroom must be culturally embedded.

What are the implications of such a view? Many of the implications emanating from this perspective are explored by the individual contributors to this volume. Among them are the following:

1 We should be aware that every manifestation of classroom practice *may* have meaning and value in its own context.
2 Before seeking to sweep away traditional modes of behaviour, therefore, we must examine them with care and seek to understand them.
3 When making recommendations for innovation in English language methodology, we must carry out the equivalent of an environmental audit of the impact of our proposed changes. In other words, we must seek to predict what the knock-on effect of methodological change is likely to be.
4 When making recommendations for innovation, we must explore the possibility – at least – of exploiting current patterns of behaviour as a way of achieving the desired change.
5 In particular, we must be alert to the possibility that learners are making effective use of learning opportunites in non-classroom contexts.
6 We must be very cautious in making evaluative judgements of current classroom practice, particularly if as observers we do not share the same ideology as the principal participants in the classroom event.
7 We must question whether there are universally appropriate ways of evaluating the success or otherwise of English language teaching projects.
8 We must learn to question the ideological origins of our own assumptions about all aspects of English language teaching in institutional contexts.